

THE DREAM OF TUSCANY

Every Woman's (and Man's) Notion of a Romantic Holiday

By Bill and Anita Finley, Travel Writer and Publisher

Red-roofed hill-towns, rolling vistas of grapes, narrow winding roads and ancient churches present a panorama of a landscape that is a pleasant relief from McDonald's America. Driving on their Italian superhighways is a bit unnerving because of skinny lanes and high speeds. But, if you can just enjoy the views, imagine driving for two hours and never seeing a residential subdivision or a fast food joint.



The heart of Tuscany is Florence, a sprawling, ancient city known as one of the most beautiful in the world. Straddling the picturesque Arno River, its religious spires dominate the skyline because no modern skyscrapers are permitted. Values here are based on age, the quality of careful restoration and the way modern demands are met by preserving 100% of a building's exterior at the same time installing contemporary technology.

In fact, the entire nation has adopted the principle of preservation and restoration instead of tearing down old buildings and constructing sleek new ones. The official agency dedicated to preservation is one gigantic watchdog actually using satellite pictures to assure compliance. Italy is not rich in natural resources but is fantastically wealthy in exciting history, pedestrian convenience and safety and beauties of urban scenery and natural settings.



Tuscany is but one of 20 regions of Italy, north of Rome and Naples, south of Milan with hundreds of shoreline miles on the blue-green Tyrrhenian Sea. Though Florence is the most famous of its historic cities, many others are equally magnetic in terms of their monuments, cathedrals, grand plazas and winding streets filled with cafes and shops.

As in any travel experience, half the joy is connected to where you stay and whether you have friends in the area. Many of us saw the movie, "Under The Tuscan Sun" and dreamt of

vacationing in a villa there with friends and lots of books to read.

So it was with great joy that we were invited to another sort of Villa holiday in Tuscany. Our recent week in Tuscany was made all the more marvelous by where we slept and ate and by our gracious hosts. Our destination was enhanced by our staying in a restored villa on an estate outside the small but spectacular city of Lucca—a mini-Florence, to be sure. This ancient walled city houses 50,000 people within the walls and about the same on the outer fringes. The well-preserved wall is about 35 feet high and a hundred feet thick at its base.

Along the top is a pedestrian-bikeway that circles the town.



Our hosts' beautiful estate is dominated by the Villa Buonvisi, built in the 16th Century and being internally modernized to serve as a guest mansion starting in March of next year. It has ten bedrooms with private baths, a large swimming pool, gardens, billiards, bocce and a home theatre and gym. It is only minutes from the urban conveniences of charming Lucca. This is a perfect setting and arrangement for a wedding party, a large gathering or a reunion of family and friends. Its accommodations are first class, but not uppity. The land sits at the bottom of a mountain and they have an arrangement with the moon and stars to shine right on the estate each night. Late night swimming is allowed and encouraged, so this is the place to have that unforgettable experience to last you a lifetime.

We stayed in their adjacent smaller, but charming Villa del Barbaro, which had a communal dining space where we were treated to the enthusiasm of Lucolo, a famous Pizza maker who gave us a master class in making pizza...his ten different ways to make pizza (all from scratch, of course!). Everyone and everything

was so perfect, it all seemed like a movie set. Even our beautiful housekeeper was straight out of a Fellini movie!

We were also pleased to be with a group of other journalists, coming from Philadelphia, New York, California, Las Vegas, and Illinois, all experiencing this magnificence. Getting to know the owners of the estate, Joe and Gianna Dini, with their gracious hospitality and personal warmth changed us from travelers to houseguests—a better way to see and know a country. They hosted many parties and their guests came from near and far. We were included in all their parties, to be sure. What a week! Gianna and her sons, Nick and Andrew escorted us to many of the towns to visit and sightsee. Gianna could be a movie star and a high fashion model with the assortment of clothing and

jewels she wore. Her style is truly WOW! She convinced me to accompany her to Lucia Giovannetti, the extraordinary jewelry designer in Lucca where, of course, I bought a unique pair of earrings that I will forever cherish.

Joe and Gianna are very well informed on all subjects dear to the hearts of travelers in



Italy: wine, olive oil and history. They have lived in the United States and



traveled all over the world, so living in Lucca is a very definite choice. They love this area and have spent a lot of time and money to create some extraordinary villas.

What did we do in the evenings? Here's one good one. They made arrangements before the Italian late dinner hour, to attend a Puccini con-

cert of arias held in a small ancient church noted for its fine acoustics. The two Italian sopranos, accompanied by a pianist, sang 14 popular arias, mostly by Puccini, a native son of Lucca and some by Beethoven. The crowded church, with its flickering candles, reflected the tears in our eyes, from this glorious experience.



Photo: Anita Finley

Each day was filled with a gustatory event at a different restaurant. Whether lunch or dinner, each meal had many small courses with different foods, fish, pasta and delicious desserts. Nothing would do but for our hosts to outdo themselves with their final farewell dinner in the grand dining room of their large villa. It is worthy to note that everything that is cooked in homes and restaurants uses olive oil to cook, to dip, to rub on. Whether it's just "virgin" or "extra extra virgin," food is fresh, colorful and too, too good! The fine restaurants made it a presentation with flowers, herbs and lots and lots of wine. Dinners are events with plenty of laughter, chatter and friendship. Time seems to stand still...rushing is not allowed!

The Spas in Italy are famous and with luck, Lucca has San Giuliano Terme, with treatments that are just so special. The waters are therapeutic and the ambiance is totally astonishing, with flowers, fragrances and magic hands. Hours could become days if you had time.

Everyone gets a tour of Villa Buonvisi and learns how grapes are chosen and olives are pressed to keep a personal stock for the owners, friends and their guests. The same goes for the olive oil. Even though it seemed like hard work to squeeze and press, Joe was in his element, working with nature and its processes. (No one was able to fully explain why the olive oil is called "virgin" but we have our own ideas.)

There is so much to see in every small town that once you have spent



Photo: Anita Finley

Photo: Bill Finley